

How do you know if someone speaks from God?

1 John 4:1-6

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“What on earth is this guy talking about” I wondered? I was leading a Bible Study. Looking at spiritual gifts in 1st Corinthians 12. I was talking when a newcomer raised his hand. He said he doesn’t agree with all this spiritual gifts talk. He asked if he could address the group. I thought this was a strange request. We discussed as a group. But he was new so I let him talk. He started talking about a vision he’d had. He claimed Jesus appeared and told him that all churches were teaching falsehood. It was his job to go and inform all churches about this. He was there to do that with us. He started talking about other strange things. He seemed like he intended to talk for hours. So I interrupted him and said something like “we’re here to talk about 1st Corinthians. We can talk about what you have to say after our session is done.” So I finished the lesson and then talked with him. He was a little ticked that I hadn’t let him share the so called truth. But he wanted to become part of us so he kept coming. The more we got to know him, the more it became apparent that he did not talk for God but had some wild delusions about his own importance. Eventually, we had to restrict his involvement because he was so disruptive. Yet he claimed to be speaking for God.

A few years later, I pastored a smaller church in the Ottawa area. You can be more intimate and family like in a smaller church. We facilitated this by opening our services up each week for anyone to request prayer or praise the Lord. For the most part, that was a very special time in our services. But one Sunday, we had a unique visitor. When the time came for sharing, he got up to speak. He talked about a message he had from God. He was really excited to share it with everyone. He claimed he had proof about the true version of the Bible. He began to get real animated. Then he said something like “This is important stuff! Are you listening?” The people sitting near where he stood nodded furiously for fear of what he would do to them if they weren’t listening. I was about to step in when he sat down. So a deacon prayed. The service ended and in that church, we had Sunday School after the worship service. The adults would meet to discuss the message.

This guy had rushed out of church after the service. He came back with the proof of the true version of the Bible. He wanted to take over the entire Sunday School class. So he asked “can I show the class all of this?” “No,” I said. “What do you mean? I brought it to show.” “No, I don’t know you. We’re not talking about this today. We’re talking about the message.” Then he was mad. “Anyone should be able to speak in the church. Can’t anyone speak in the church,” he stated fairly aggressively. “Not in this class at this time. We’ll have to talk about this later.” But that wasn’t good enough for him. He angrily wrapped up his proof and stormed out. He claimed to speak for God. Maybe I missed something – but it didn’t seem like either of these individuals spoke for God.

Anyone can claim that they speak for God. But not everyone who makes that claim actually does. In fact, there are unseen spiritual influences that guide people’s speech and actions all the time. But how do you know whether or not they speak for God?

Now some of you might immediately relate to this. You’ve heard speakers who claimed to be from God but there was something off in their message. Or you have family or loved ones who are under the influence of someone who claims to speak for God. But you’re not sure about them or you know for a fact that they are way off.

But there might be others of you who see no relevance of this to your life at all. I don’t listen to weird people except Pastor Tom – he’s enough weirdness for me. You may seldom have spiritual conversations with others. You might not listen to many preachers or speakers. But there are spirits behind the messages we see and hear all the time. Think about the director and producers of the movies we watch; the games we play; the websites we visit; the comedian we like; a TV show we might watch; a singer or group we listen to; a book we read; an advertisement we see or hear.

Spirits influence all these people. But which spirit? There are good spirits. As Christians, God dwells in us by the Holy Spirit. The Bible also tells us that angels are ministering spirits for believers. Jesus sends forth seven good spirits or angels to the churches in Revelation 3 and 4 and into all the earth

in Revelation 5. But more commonly, the New Testament associates spirits with evil (Matthew 12:45; Luke 11:26; Acts 19:12-13), uncleanness (Mark 3:11, 5:13, Acts 8:7), false prophecy (Rev. 16:13) and demons (16:14).

So we must test what people say or do or write or produce or sing to discern what kind of spirit influences them. We must regularly test what kind of spirit we're allowing to influence us.

John raises this issue for us in the next part of his letter. He calls his readers to recognize that not everyone who claims to speak for God actually does. He will provide tests for them to discern what they're hearing and seeing. My aim is to equip you with 2 answers to the question "How can you know if someone speaks from God?" We will then apply these 2 tests to ourselves as we meet the Lord at His table.

John directs us to this in the passage just read for us 1 John 4:1-6. He alerts us to the fact that Christians can be deceived. Christians can gullibly accept bogus claims. *Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.* In the verse just before this one John declares that we know God abides in us because His Spirit is in us.

But not every spirit is good and there are many of them. The reason for the warning is simple: "Many false prophets have gone out into the world." Greco-Roman religion of the time trafficked heavily in secret knowledge of sacred mysteries. There was a huge market for personal dream revelations, oracles and their interpretation, magic and astrology. Ancient manuscripts document that a Roman commander kept a Syrian prophetess named Martha with his army to give advice on important decisions. The Roman senate could settle an issue according to the prophetic pronouncement of a priest or priestess.

Today we live in a similar market. Just stop by the spirituality section of any bookstore to see what's out there. Many false prophets have gone into the world even today and you can buy their

books in Chapters. That's the obvious alternative spirituality. But there are the subtle messages that speak through movies, games, advertisements and songs.

"Oh, come on Tom, you're being a little dramatic about everything. Yeah, there are some people into some crazy things spiritually but movies and shows on TV are okay. They don't have a spiritual message or a spirit behind them. " I remember when the film Titanic came out several years ago. There was all this hype about the greatness of this movie. The storyline revolves around two young people on the Titanic. The guy comes the lower classes and the girl from the upper class. Eventually she and him get together. He enables her to throw off the shackles of her restrictive mother, oppressive fiancée and the expectations upon a girl of the upper class. She survives the Titanic's sinking and he dies. She returns in the movie as an old woman telling her story.

Well I went to my preaching retreat and one of our speakers addressed the question of spirituality in the mass media. I think he talked about the movie Titanic. Immediately, our professor piped up. He had seen it and at the end of it, he said to his wife, "that is a Satanic movie." There were no devils in it. So we asked him what he meant by that. He pointed to a statement that the old woman made near the end of the movie. When someone asked if she regretted that this young man had come into her life and then died, she said "Oh no. He was the best thing that happened to me. He saved me in every possible way you could be saved." How did he save her? He encouraged and led her to throw off restraint of any kind in her life. To her that was the ultimate salvation. Who wrote that into the script? The screen writers wrote it under the direction and production of James Cameron. The guy speaking about media said "Titanic was a big production of James Cameron's world view that any restraint is wrong and freedom to do whatever you want is salvation." But that's not salvation as described in the New Testament. So the spirit influencing James Cameron at that time was certainly not the Spirit of God.

There are many people out there who speak, write, sing, comment, act, design and direct by the spirit of God, but not everyone. John reminds us to ask what spirit speaks through the people around us – those we admire; those we live with; those we work with or for? What spirit is behind this movie or TV show or book or singer? What spirit do we allow to influence and speak through us? Christians can be deceived. That's why John warns them about this.

Then he shows them how to test if someone speaks from God. **How can you tell if someone speaks from God?** This is the test – you can gain confidence that someone is speaking from God **if they can confess and believe that Jesus the man is the Christ or Son of God.** Verse 2 - *By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.* Now this does not mean that a simple recitation of the formula “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh” guarantees the messenger is from God. They must also profess and live out faith in Christ openly and boldly. After all, Demons confessed Jesus was Son of the Most High God. But they certainly didn't put faith in him. (Mark 5:7)

If someone declares “Jesus the man was God the Son in flesh” and put their own faith in Him, that's a good indicator. It's a pretty simple statement – but let's think about its implications.

Think how it strips away alternative views of Christ. Jesus was a good moral teacher. Was He God in flesh? No. But he was a good moral teacher. Jesus was a prophet. Was He God in flesh? No, but he was a prophet. Jesus was one of many religious founders like the Moses, Buddha, Muhammad and Joseph Smith. But was He God in the flesh? No he was a religious founder. This strips away the apparently friendly statements about Jesus.

Think about what it implies about Jesus. Jesus the man was actually God in human flesh. Remember who writes these words: John who was among those who had physical contact with Jesus. Jesus' humanity was not in question for John. Remember at the beginning of the letter – “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have

looked upon and have touched with our hands we proclaim to you.” John ate with Jesus. He walked with Him, talked with Him. John witnessed His miracles. John heard his teaching and sat or reclined right beside Jesus at the Last Supper. John saw Jesus’ suffer in the garden, the high priest’s house and on the cross. John outran Peter to the empty tomb. John talked to the resurrected Christ and ate some of the fish Jesus prepared for them. John witnessed Jesus ascend physically into heaven.

John saw this mysterious mix of God and man. Jesus was not God the Father. But He somehow possessed a commonality with God that no other human ever has or could. (Robert Yarborough). So a spirit from God would not distort the two-sided truth of Jesus full humanity and full divinity. Nor would it encourage any sort of disobedience to Jesus’ commands

But there are spirits who are against Jesus. John talks about them in verse 3. *And every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.* So this is not some finer point of doctrine that has little relevance to our lives today. This is the specter of the antichrist himself, who, as John has already said, has come and is active in the world. Remember back in chapter 2 we learned the antichrist is a human representative or embodiment of the evil one. At the very end of time THE antichrist will come. But back in chapter 2, John says many antichrists have already come. Satan will stoop to any level to deceive people, including God’s people, who are apparently vulnerable to such deception.

So when you talk with people who are greatly opposed to Christ or speak about Jesus in some distorted way, they listen to the spirit of the antichrist. Some may be deceived. Some are determined to rebel against God. But they are all being influenced by the spirit against Christ.

But we gain confidence that if someone speaks from God? If 1 – They confess that the man Jesus was in fact God, the Son in flesh. That confession needs to be backed up by a life that strives to obey Christ’s commandments and shows a deepening love for others.

John tells us about another answer in the last verse of this passage. Verse 6 – 6 *We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.* This seems like an incredibly arrogant statement to make doesn't it? "Whoever knows God listens to us." That kind of sounds like "God told me this and you have to listen to me." But the Apostles remember who writes this – John, the apostle. He writes "whoever knows God listens to us – us the apostles; the ones called by God to bear witness to the world about the risen Christ. Every New Testament book was written by an apostle or their close associate. The Gospel came from God and was proclaimed by the apostles. John says whoever knows God listens to us. So how do you know if someone speaks for God? **Answer #2 - They listen and submit to what God's appointed apostles say and write.**

We do have his writing in the Gospel of John, 1st, 2nd and 3rd John and Revelation. We also have the writing of the apostle Matthew, one of Jesus' twelve disciples. We have the gospel of Mark, a close associate of the apostle Peter and we have Peter's letters. We have Luke, a close associate of the Apostle Paul. We have all of Paul's writings along with James and Judas the Lord's brothers. So we can gain some further assurance or confidence that someone is speaking from the Spirit of Christ if they follow and listen to the apostle's teaching in the New Testament.

So if someone claims to have all this spiritual knowledge and wisdom but pays no attention to the New Testament, we gain a pretty good idea about which spirits influence them. But if someone is growing in their understanding of Jesus' teaching and their life reflects His more and more, it's much more likely that they're listening to the spirit of Christ.

The more we learn and heed the apostle's teaching, the more we will be able to test the spirits in things like movies, books, songs, ads, websites and speakers. I'm not saying that we must only watch Christian movies or TV shows, read Christian books, listen to Christian songs, watch Christian ads and listen to Christian speakers. Not everything labelled Christian is actually put forward with the Spirit of

Christ. Sometimes, it's put forward with a spirit of jealousy or greed. There can be value in paying attention to that which is not obviously Christian yet still is beautiful or true or building up or helpful. All truth is ultimately from God. Every good gift ultimately comes from Him.

But I am saying we might need to be more discerning with what we put into our hearts and minds. And we certainly have to pay attention to what's coming out of us. We need to examine our speech for out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. We need to test our thoughts and be transformed by the renewing of our minds – then we will be able to test and approve what is the will of God. We need to pay attention to what sort of dark or light spiritual culture appeals to us – is it dark; depraved; despairing or hopeful; holy and wholesome? If we've been dabbling in any sort of questionable spirituality that invites spirits other than Christ into our lives, we've got to renounce those and remove them from our lives. This includes obvious influences like astrology, horoscopes, psychics, mediums and the occult. But there are also more subtle influences in our culture like consumerism and idolatry. Perhaps the greatest idolatry we must battle against today is the worship of ourselves which our culture constantly encourages us in.

Now all this might seem a bit daunting. But I've saved the best news for last. We're not alone in this at all. Did you notice it in 1 John 4:4? *4 Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.* Did you catch that? Little children. You are from God and have overcome them. NOT you will overcome them or you are overcoming them. You have overcome them. "Them" could be the false prophets or the spirits of the antichrist. But either way, John's readers have overcome them in that they have not been ultimately deceived. They still believe in Christ. They have not allowed themselves to buy into false teaching or crazy talk about Jesus. Satan didn't get them. Jesus holds them in His hand and no one can snatch them out. The same is true for you Christian.

But just in case we begin to think we're pretty hot stuff because we've overcome them, John reminds us of the source of our overcoming. "Because greater is he who is in you than he who is in the world." He who is in you is Jesus Christ and the Spirit. He who is in the world – the devil. No matter what this culture throws at us, no matter how twisted and depraved it gets, we have Jesus in us.

This does not deny the reality of our struggles or the threat of slippage or failure. But John reminds us that the greatest one is with us and in us. Yarborough writes "as surely as Christ came in the flesh, died, rose and intercedes, believers can be assured that they will not fall prey to God's opponent. The victory is Christ's and it becomes ours as we abide and remain in Him each day of our journey."

Jesus invites us to first receive His freeing salvation. He frees us from the just judgment of God on our sins but also from the oppression of evil spirits. By Him and through Him we can renounce those spirits that oppress us and move forward under His Lordship. He invites us to become part of God's family as reconciled and forgiven children because of what He did on the cross. So will you receive Him maybe for the first time today? Or will you confess that you've been listening to spirits of the antichrist and turn away from them to Him? Or will you call upon Him to help you discern the spirits around people you're not sure of? And will you ask Him to help you see the deceptions and lies set out to destroy you? He will do it. He is great! There is none greater in the world!